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The Pueblo 'Letter'

The State Department has been cautious, and rightly so, in reacting to the "letter" to President Johnson allegedly signed by the 82 surviving members of the Pueblo, our electronic surveillance ship which was seized by the North Koreans on January 23.

All that the department's press officer, Robert J. McCloskey, has said so far is this: "I am not in a position to comment on or evaluate the authenticity of the letter or the signatures at this time. It is being studied."

We do not think that there is anything more that McCloskey could have said or should have said at this stage of the matter. For the signed letter was handed to our negotiators by their North Korean opposite numbers at Panmunjom on March 3, and it is now supposed to be on its way to Washington. When and if it arrives, a judgment can be made as to its authenticity, and handwriting experts certainly should be able to say whether some or all of the signatures are genuine.

Reading the published text of the letter, one is inclined to believe that it is not something that was faked by a North Korean — as some of the earlier alleged confessions by crewmen quite obviously were. This new document, judging from the internal evidence of its sentence structure and choice of language, probably was written by an educated American, or at least by someone who is skilled in the use of American-style English.

Of course, it does not necessarily follow that the contents of the letter, even if it was written by the commanding officer of the Pueblo or other crew members, is a factual statement. There is considerable reason to believe that, in part at least, it is not. But there is also reason to think that to some extent it may be truthful—especially when one recalls that Messrs. McNamara and Rusk said a few weeks ago that they could not say with certainty that the Pueblo had never ventured into what North Korea claims as its territorial waters. As to this, one must read the text of the letter and form his own judgments.

The thing that can be tested, with a very high degree of dependability, is the authenticity of the signatures. And if the conclusion should be that the signatures are genuine, we would not want to be required to make the decision that awaits the President.

The burden of the letter is to this effect: The Pueblo was in North Korean waters on five occasions. The crew first denied these incursions, hoping to "safeguard national security and our national honor." The evidence which the North Koreans found in the Pueblo's log books, charts and other documents was so overwhelming, however, that the skipper and his crew finally admitted their guilt. Now they are conscience-stricken and they appeal to the President, for the sake of their families and themselves, to make the amends necessary to obtain their release. The amends include an admission by our government that the Pueblo was in North Korean waters when boarded, which would mean that our earlier denials of this were false; that a "sincere" apology be extended to North Korea, and that assurance be given against repetition of "these acts."

Much of this is simply unbelievable. All of it is hard to swallow. If the signatures prove to be genuine, however, the President will have to make one of several very painful choices: (1) Simply forget about these men and write them off as casualties, in line with the suggestion by former CIA Director Allen Dulles. (2) Find some way, as yet undiscovered, to force the North Koreans to release them unharmed. (3) Swallow the bitter pill, perhaps in some milder form, which this letter presses upon him.

With Americans dying by the thousands in South Vietnam, with new riots threatening in our cities, with inflation eating away at the American dollar, it surely is permissible to wonder why so many men strive so mightily to gain the White House. It is fortunate for the country that they do. But the question remains. And the agonizing decision which Mr. Johnson must make in the relatively small incident of the Pueblo letter puts a sharp edge on that question.